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TAGS: MCAP PGOV PHUM  
SUBJECT: LIFE AS A RUSSIAN CONSCRIPT

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Aleksandr Igorevich Matushov, a 21-year old conscript soldier from Smolensk Oblast, related his experiences in the Russian army to us January 28. He ran away from his unit, the 252 Support Company, on January 24 to escape the much-publicized hazing that plagues the Russian military. He described the unofficial hierarchy among conscripts and detailed the beatings and extortion that take place every day in his unit. Matushov told us that without the hazing, life in the Russian army could be enjoyable. He said the equipment and training he received was good, and his unit was combat-ready. Matushov predicted that conscripting soldiers to serve one year rather than two years or 18 months would not solve the problem of hazing. With the help of the Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committee, Matushov returned to the army on January 29 to finish his term of conscription, albeit in a different unit. End Summary.

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Spirits, Elephants, Ladles, and Grandfathers  
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¶12. (C) With the help of the Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committee, we met Aleksandr Matushov, a 21-year old conscript who related his experience in the Russian army. Matushov explained that newly-drafted conscript soldiers are called "spirits." After serving six months, they are referred to as "elephants." After serving 12 months, they are referred to as "ladles," and after 18 months, they are called "grandfathers." "Spirits" spend almost their entire time in basic training, and so do not suffer much hazing per se. "Elephants" receive the worst abuse, such as beatings and financial extortion, usually at the hands of "grandfathers." "Ladles," according to Matushov, lead a much quieter life, usually neither abusing their fellow conscripts nor being abused themselves. Matushov recently became a "ladle."

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Hazing At A Glance  
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¶13. (C) According to Matushov, conscript soldiers can expect to be beaten up to ten times per day, usually by older conscript soldiers. For the sake of efficiency (and presumably to instill greater fear), young conscripts are often forced to stand at attention in their ranks while older conscripts move down the line, punching each soldier one after the other. Sometimes beatings are less well-organized, and an older soldier will simply walk up to a young conscript and punch him. Matushov said older conscripts say the beatings are necessary "army" discipline. He said that he had heard about more egregious forms of hazing, such as forcing conscripts to work as prostitutes, but he had not seen that in his unit. He also did not know of anyone in his unit forced to sign up for contract military service.

14. (C) Matushov defended the officers in his unit as "good people," who do not usually victimize conscripts. He added that most hazing incidents take place when officers are not present, and so the officers in the unit are not aware of the extent of the hazing. Young conscripts are reluctant to tell the officers about specific incidents for fear of harsh reprisal from the older conscripts.

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Extortion: The Russian Army's GI Bill?  
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15. (C) Matushov claimed extortion was rampant in his unit. Indeed, this problem was the main reason why he ran away. "Elephants" must pay "grandfathers" up to 2,500 rubles per month, no small sum for a Russian conscript soldier who makes about 500 rubles per month. "Elephants" who failed to deliver the required sum were subject to even harsher beatings than usual. For this reason, many conscript soldiers are forced to beg for money in the streets, steal, or raise money in some other way. Matushov added that a friend from his unit committed suicide because he could no longer stand the beatings he received for failure to pay the "grandfathers" enough money each month.

16. (C) "Grandfathers" often resort to extortion to save up money before they transition back to civilian life. According to Matushov, "Grandfathers" can collect as much as 3,000 USD by the end of their service. This money is often used to purchase new clothes and other goods needed after leaving the military.

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The Army Is Great, Except For the Beatings  
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17. (C) Matushov said that the training he received and the equipment he used was of high quality. He and his fellow soldiers especially enjoyed practicing their marksmanship and otherwise "blowing things up." He said his unit drilled until they executed their maneuvers with precision. He claimed there was no shortage of ammunition or equipment needed to drill, and the equipment he used was new and in good condition. In Matushov's opinion, his unit was ready to fight.

18. (C) Matushov said the army lifestyle would suit him just fine if it were not for the hazing. He said the food was good, and soldiers received new uniforms and boots every six months. The living quarters, he said, were recently renovated in anticipation of the 2007 Torgau exercises, and so were very comfortable. Above all, he enjoyed the time he spent with his army comrades.

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One-year Conscription Is Not the Answer  
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19. (C) Matushov argued that conscripting soldiers for one year would not end the hazing problem. He said that many soldiers conscripted for two years were very resentful of the soldiers conscripted for only 18 months, and so had even more motivation to beat them. He was sure that those conscripted for 18 months would treat the soldiers conscripted for one year similarly. In any event, the pool of young men from which conscripts were taken would remain the same (no young men from wealthy families serve in his unit, he said), and so hazing was sure to continue.

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Union of Soldiers' Mothers To Help Return To Military Duty  
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110. (C) Matushov said that he had no choice but to return to the military to finish his term of conscription, which would most likely be November 2008. He said the Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committee helped him after he ran away, and even

worked with the Ministry of Defense to have him reassigned to another unit. After completing his service, Matushov hoped to marry his girlfriend from Smolensk Oblast, who is currently a nurse, and move to Moscow to work as a computer programmer.

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Comment  
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¶11. (C) Hazing has been a chronic and well-scrutinized issue for at least the past 15 years, with several recently publicized cases becoming national-level scandals. Despite all the rhetoric of senior military and civilian leaders in MOD and in Main Military Procuracy, there appears to be little chance of mitigating or eliminating this odious, but deeply-entrenched institution. Officers are either in denial that something like this continues to exist or, for various reasons, refuse to deal with it (e.g., it would reflect badly on their own record; they are possibly getting their own kickbacks; this is a long-accepted way of instilling "discipline" within the ranks, in the absence of competent and professional small unit leadership). Perhaps the only way the status quo could change is to eliminate conscription altogether. Matushov may, however, be correct in noting that reduction of the conscription period will only compress the duration -- and possibly intensify the nature -- of the hazing.

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